

ORSETT BRIEFING PAPERS FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

No.8 - Social Stratification

INTRODUCTION

Social stratification is a particular form of inequality in society that "refers to the presence of distinct social groups which are ranked one above the other in terms of factors such as prestige and wealth" (Haralambos and Holborn 1995 p21).

Within a social group, there will be similarities in lifestyle, and an awareness of common interests and/or identity. Many people talk about social class as the best example of social stratification, but there are other examples, like the caste system in traditional Indian society.

For some (eg: functionalists), social stratification is the basis of meritocracy where society rewards those who "succeed" in society compared to those who don't. For others, like Karl Marx, social stratification is detrimental.

MARXIST VIEW OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

The best known writing on social stratification comes from Karl Marx. He viewed society as divided into the "ruling class" and the "subject class". The former have power because of the ownership of the "means of production" (eg: land, capital), and they are able to exploit the "subject class". This situation produces a conflict of interests between the two classes in society, which can only be resolved when the "means of production" are communally owned.

The different classes will vary depending on the society. In feudal societies, the "ruling class" are the feudal nobility (ie: landowners), and the "subject class" are landless serfs. In capitalist societies, this becomes bourgeoisie or capitalists (ruling class) and proletariat or working class (subject class).

The underlying class struggle in any society is the dominant force in society, for Marx. There is a distinction between a "class in itself" and a "class for

itself" in this process. A "class in itself" is a social group who share the same relationship to the means of production, and are not really a social class. While a "class for itself" has "class consciousness" (it is aware of the true situation of exploitation in society), and "class solidarity" (a common identity). A "class for itself" can bring about social change by collective action.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION BASED ON MORE THAN TWO CLASSES

Marx's idea, of two distinct classes only, seems too simple for modern capitalist societies. Thus other theories have developed based on more diverse distinctions.

MAX WEBER

Weber noted that certain individuals with skills that society demands can become important in a society, though they do not own the means of production. The best example of this class is the bureaucrat (managers, administrators, professionals) in capitalist societies.

Weber distinguished four class groupings in capitalist societies:

- a) propertied upper-class;
- b) propertyless white-collar workers (eg: bureaucrats);
- c) petty bourgeoisie (owners of small amounts of means of production, like shopkeepers);
- d) manual working-class.

For Weber, a class can form because of a similar status situation (ie: "social honour"). With the bureaucrat, social status is gained by professionals (like accountants or solicitors) through qualifications, and restricted access. Such a class share a similar lifestyle and identity, and restrict the access of outsiders to them. For example, individuals must pay to see such professionals and to use their expertise.

Table 1 shows a brief comparison of Weber, Marx, and Functionalist views of social stratification.

MARXIST	WEBER	FUNCTIONALIST
CLASS DIVISIONS FROM:		
relations to production	operation of market	meritocratic processes of job allocation based on shared values
MAJOR CLASSES:		
bourgeoisie/ working-class	propertied class/ white-collar/ working-class	socially ranked occupational strata
VIEWS OF CLASS CONFLICT:		
from exploitation	competition between and within classes	harmonistic

Table 1 - Comparison of main ideas on stratification by Marx, Weber, and Functionalists ¹.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUPS

In terms of the collection of data, official government statistics tend to use socio-economic groups (people with jobs of similar social and economic status) as the means of social stratification.

This is the case in the UK. For example, the distinction between manual jobs (unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled), and non-manual jobs (routine eg: clerical, intermediate eg: teachers, and professional eg: doctor).

Table 2 shows the division of British society in 1975 and 1991 based on socio-economic groups.

	1975	1991
PROFESSIONAL	3	4
EMPLOYERS AND MANAGERS	9	14
INTERMEDIATE/ROUTINE NON-MANUAL	32	33
SKILLED MANUAL	24	23
SEMI-SKILLED MANUAL	24	18
UNSKILLED MANUAL	7	8

Table 2 - Percentages of British population in different socio-economic groups in 1975 and 1991 ².

¹ After Bradley (1996).

² After Bridgewood, A & Savage, D (1993) 1991 General Household Survey, London: HMSO; quoted

John Goldthorpe's class schemes have become most commonly used for statistics in Britain (table 3).

CLASSES I and II	professional, high-grade technicians, supervisors of non-manual work
CLASS III	routine non-manual in administration and commerce, sales personnel, service workers
CLASS IVab CLASS IVc	small proprietors, self-employed farmers, self-employed in primary production
CLASS V and VI	lower-grad technicians, supervisors of manual work, skilled manual
CLASS VIIa	semi and unskilled manual
CLASS VIIb	agricultural and workers in primary production

Table 3 - Goldthorpe's revised class scheme ³.

GENDER

Societies may also be stratified along gender lines. Table 4 shows the distribution of socio-economic groups based on gender in 1991.

	MALE	FEMALE
PROFESSIONAL	7	1
EMPLOYERS AND MANAGERS	19	9
INTERMEDIATE/ROUTINE NON-MANUAL	17	48
SKILLED MANUAL	38	9
SEMI-SKILLED MANUAL	14	22
UNSKILLED MANUAL	5	11

Table 4 - Percentage of population in socio-economic groups in Britain by gender in 1991 ⁴.

ETHNICITY

Similarly, social stratification will also be based upon ethnic lines. Table 5 shows the distribution of

in Haralambos and Holborn (1995).

³ After Goldthorpe, J.H (1987) Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain (rev ed), London: Macmillan; quoted in Haralambos & Holborn (1995).

⁴ After Bridgewood & Savage op cit; quoted in Haralambos and Holborn (1995).

socio-economic groups based on ethnicity (and gender) in Britain 1988-90.

	WHITE MALE/FEMALE	ETHNIC MALE/FEMALE
PROFESSIONAL MANAGER/EMPLOYER	27/11	21/9
PROFESSIONAL WORKERS	7/2	8/2
SKILLED MANUAL	33/5	28/5
SEMI-SKILLED MANUAL	15/22	23/27
UNSKILLED MANUAL	4/7	5/5

Table 5 - Percentage of population in socio-economic groups in Britain based on ethnicity and gender 1988-90 ⁵.

CHANGES IN STRATIFICATION IN MODERN CAPITALIST SOCIETIES

PROLETARIANISATION

This is the theory that routine white-collar work has become downgraded or deskilled, and is no longer part of the middle-class. It is part of the proletariat or working-class ⁶.

This change is mainly due to the vast increase in clerical work in the 20th century. In 1870, 0.6% of the US population was engaged in clerical work, and one hundred years later, it was 18%. The deskilling of such work is furthered by computerisation.

Crompton and Jones ⁷ studied 887 white-collar employees in a local authority, a life assurance company, and a major bank. The researchers found that the vast majority of workers had no control over how they worked, and simply followed a set of routines. This was particularly true for female workers in this "white-collar proletariat", with little chance of promotion.

EMBOURGEOISEMENT

In the 1950s and 1960s, industrial prosperity in Britain led to the appearance of the "affluent worker". These were highly paid manual workers, who could be said to have entered the middle-class. Embourgeoisement was

⁵ After Jones, T (1993) Britain's Ethnic Minorities, London: Policy Studies Institute; quoted in Haralambos & Holborn (1995).

⁶ Braverman, H (1974) Labour and Monopoly Capitalism, New York: Monthly Review Press.

⁷ Crompton, R & Jones, G (1984) White-Collar Proletariat. Deskilling and Gender in Clerical Work, London: Macmillan.

the change in values that went with the increasing wealth of such manual workers. Simply speaking, middle-class incomes led to middle-class lifestyles.

Whether embourgeoisement did occur or it was the formation of a new working-class is the question. This was studied in most detail in a study led by Goldthorpe ⁸. They interviewed 229 manual workers in 1963-4 in Luton.

UNDERCLASS

Recent interest has focused on groups of individuals at the bottom of the social hierarchy, who cannot be classified like the rest of society. Charles Murray ⁹ has written about them as a threat to modern US (and British) society. It is not so much that the "underclass" are poor, but they do not share the values of society as a whole.

Murray defined the "underclass" in Britain thus:

Their homes were littered and unkempt. The men in the family were unable to hold a job for more than a few weeks at a time. Drunkenness was common. The children grew up ill-schooled and ill-behaved and contributed a disproportionate share to the local juvenile delinquents ¹⁰.

The "underclass" are a sub-group of the poor, and it is based around high levels of illegitimate births (ie: outside marriage, or stable partnership), crime, and unemployment, for Murray.

Murray controversially argued that government benefits have encouraged the development of the "underclass". His views are clearly challenged by many researchers ¹¹.

GLOBAL STRATIFICATION

Social stratification does not exist just within a society, but also can be seen at a global level. It is

⁸ Goldthorpe, J.H; Lockwood, D; Bechhofer, F & Platt, J (1969) *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁹ Murray, C (1984) *Losing Ground*, New York: Basic Books.

¹⁰ Murray, C (1989) Underclass *Sunday Times Magazine* 26/11; quoted in Haralambos & Holborn (1995).

¹¹ eg: Walker, A (1990) *Blaming the victim*; Deakin, N (1990) *Mr.Murray's ark*; both in Murray, C (ed) *The Emerging British Underclass*, London: Institute of Economic Affairs.

possible to see inequalities between the rich Western countries and the rest of the world as a form of stratification. The most obvious difference here is in terms of poverty.

The "Human Development Index" (HDI) is calculated by the UN based on a composite of three things: length of life and health; knowledge (ie: education); and standard of living. The figures is greatly influenced by the presence of war in a country (table 6).

HIGHEST HDI RANK	LOWEST HDI RANK
1. Norway	158. Ethiopia
2. Australia	159. Burkina Faso
3. Canada	160. Burundi
	161. Niger
6. USA	162. Sierra Leone
14. UK	

Table 6 - Highest and lowest HDI ranks in 2001 ¹².

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND LIFE CHANCES

The position of the individual in the social hierarchy will influence their "life chances" ie: there will be clear differences in aspects of life between the bottom and the top of society. Government statistics for Britain show examples of these differences in education, mental health, and infant mortality (table 7).

PARENTS' SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUP	GCSE*	MENTAL** DISORDERS	INFANT*** MORTALITY
MANAGERIAL/PROFESSIONAL	69%	5-7%	19
OTHER NON-MANUAL	60	12	19
SKILLED MANUAL	40	8	21
SEMI-SKILLED MANUAL	32	13)28
UNSKILLED MANUAL	20	16)
OTHER/NOT CLASSIFIED	24	21	/
ALL	/	10%	22

* Attainment of 5 or more GCSE grades A-C in Year 11 in England and Wales 1998

** Mental disorders among 5-15 year olds in Britain 1998

*** Death rates per 100 000 per year for 1-4 year olds in England and Wales 1993

Table 7 - Comparison of three "life chances" based on parents' socio-economic group ¹³.

¹² After Seabrook (2002).

¹³ After Drever, F; Fisher, K; Brown, J & Clark, J (2000) Social Inequalities (2000 ed), London: Office of National Statistics.

SOURCES

Bradley, H (1996) *Fractured Identities*, Cambridge: Polity

Haralambos, M & Holborn, M (1995) *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives* (4th ed), London: Collins

Seabrook, J (2002) *Class, Caste and Hierarchies*, London: Verso

ORSETT BRIEFING PAPERS FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

NO.1 - EMILE DURKHEIM (1858-1917)	April 2003
NO.2 - BASIC GENETICS	May 2003
NO.3 - QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL DESIGNS	May 2003
NO.4 - CLINICAL TRIALS	May 2003
NO.5 - BASIC PHARMACOKINETICS	May 2003
NO.6 - POST-MODERNITY AND GLOBALISATION	May 2003
NO.7 - EPIDEMIOLOGY	July 2003
NO.8 - SOCIAL STRATIFICATION	November 2003

AUTHOR: Kevin Brewer

Price £1-50

ISSN No: 1740-4444

Orsett Psychological Services
PO Box 179
Grays
Essex
RM16 3EW

Psychology is an ever-growing subject area, and it overlaps with many other subjects, like sociology, medicine, and biology. Orsett Briefing Papers for Psychologists offers short summaries of different topics in subjects outside psychology that can be useful to psychologists.

